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SUBJECT: FRENCH MFA STAFF "REFLECTS" ON IRAQ: UNLIKELY
INCREASES IN ASSISTANCE TO INTERNAL SECURITY FORCES AND
DESIRE FOR REINFORCED UN

REF: PARIS 3534

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4. (B), (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: Franck Gellet, the French MFA's DAS covering Iraq, stressed August 31 that the lack of progress toward national reconciliation in that country is the main obstacle to internal peace and reconstruction. In that context, he believes the notion of France providing assistance to internal security forces in the foreseeable future as farfetched since it would only result in training and equipping militias. France may be reluctant officially to describe the situation in Iraq as a civil war, but Gellet said that is exactly what it is. U.S. troops, in his view, are increasingly viewed by all parties as a restraining force in terms of the violence. An eventual U.S. withdrawal, especially if signaled in advance, would lead to a likely bloodbath given current trends, since, in Gellet's view, the violence has not yet reached its apogee. The MFA is watching the domestic debate in the U.S. on troop presence closely, and Gellet hopes the Petraeus/Crocker report will not call for an explicit timetable for a pullout. FM Kouchner has not yet decided when he will reach out to EU counterparts but may say something about Iraq at the upcoming Gymnich meeting. France fully supports a reinforced UN presence, as Kouchner has stated, but Gellet believes the UN is understandably anxious about the security situation given the 2003 attack on August 31, on the UN compound. End summary

¶2. (C) French MFA DAS for Iran, Iraq, and the Gulf Franck Gellet described MFA views on the situation in Iraq and the (currently) limited opportunities for France to play a role. He indicated the previously reported "reflection" on how France might re-engage with Iraq was still ongoing (see refTel). FM Kouchner's determination, based on his firsthand appreciation of the grave humanitarian situation in Iraq during his visit, remains strong. The problem, as Gellet (who was DCM at the French embassy in Baghdad 2003-2006) sees it, remains the Iraqis themselves. As Kouchner has observed, the will for national reconciliation is strongly lacking but is the fundamental ingredient for the success of any effort at reconstruction.

¶3. (C) We asked about France's reported willingness to consider aid to Iraq's internal security and police forces. We pointed to a recent statement by the MFA's spokesperson the effect that this was under review as a possible area in which France would offer tangible assistance. Gellet suppressed a mild chuckle and explained that this matter has a relatively long history dating to the early post-Saddam period. At that time, France offered to train and equip internal security forces but only in France. The Iraqis had insisted the training occur in Iraq, and that ended the conversation. Now, Gellet continued, the situation in Iraq is out of control. Offering help to security forces now

would be little more than training and equipping militias.

¶4. (C) Speaking more broadly about the current situation in Iraq, Gellet asserted that the country was in a "civil war that no one dares label as such." Even the MFA declines to describe the violence in Iraq in those terms lest it somehow give the impression to any of the parties in conflict that they are actually vying for control of the national government. Nevertheless, in Gellet's view, the effective destruction of the state as a viable national entity and the inability of the parties singularly or collectively to agree on reconciliation makes the conflict a civil war. He agreed with analysts who have observed a lessening of the Sunni-based insurgency and a rise of latent intra-Shi'a conflict, especially in the south.

¶5. (C) Using ideas (if not the exact words) similar to Kouchner's, Gellet called the U.S. military presence in Iraq a crucial "interpositional force" that helps restrain the parties and keep the violence within bounds. This is how the contending Iraqi leaders and groups see the U.S. troops even if some still refer to them as "occupiers" in their public rhetoric. Gellet asserted that a free-for-all of violence that would surpass everything we are currently seeing would follow a sudden U.S. pullout. In his personal opinion, the Iraqi "civil war" has not yet reached its peak in terms of the violence yet to be unleashed. He saw a situation in which the growing domestic U.S. imperative to pull out of Iraq was clashing with the Iraqi imperative that U.S. troops remain to exert some measure of restraint.

¶6. (C) The MFA is watching the domestic debate in the U.S. over the war with great interest, according to Gellet. He expressed interest in reading the unclassified version of the

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latest national intelligence estimate, about which he has read a great deal. (Comment: We sent him a copy. End comment) Gellet is waiting now for the Petraeus/Crocker report and for the recommendations it might offer for the way ahead, particularly during the 2008 election year. He hoped it would not recommend a timetable for withdrawal that would also, in his view, be a timetable for ratcheting up the violence.

¶7. (C) Turning to the larger region, Gellet stated that the response from Iraq's neighbors to FM Kouchner's trip was very positive. France, as Kouchner has stated publicly, is acutely aware of the stakes for the region as a whole. As he did in a parallel conversation about Iran (septel), Gellet referred to French interests via the Gulf States and Iran's unhelpful involvement in Iraq. With respect to Europe, the MFA was still deciding how much Kouchner would say at an upcoming Gymnich meeting of EU foreign ministers, but there would at least be some "mention" of Kouchner's visit and the need for the EU to focus more attention on Iraq. Gellet was not sure how much could be done to increase the UN's importance in Iraq. The emotional scars of the 2003 bombing are real, and it is hard to see, given the currently parlous security situation in Iraq, how the UN will make good on its reinforced mandate. Nonetheless, Gellet concluded, Kouchner has made clear that France wants to UN to be a central part of the eventual solution in Iraq.

¶8. (C) Comment: Gellet freely mixed his personal views, informed by his relatively recent experience in Iraq, with the MFA's official line. He thus occasionally reflected the Quai's oldthink of Iraq as a situation beyond hope that was a U.S. and not a French problem. Indeed, at one point Gellet contended in a very matter of fact way that, heinous as the Saddam regime had been, the overall situation was stable and one understood the limits of acceptable behavior and assumed the risk of going beyond them. Nevertheless, his remarks on the U.S. troop presence reflect a more practical analysis of what is happening today in Iraq and dovetail with Kouchner's opinion that the fundamental factor blocking progress toward

normalcy in Iraq is discord among Iraq's leaders and not the U.S. troop presence. Gellet's concern about the potential bloodbath that could follow an eventual U.S. withdrawal, in the absence of national reconciliation, is one that we believe Kouchner shares. End comment
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